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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by J. H. OLDHAM

No. 70 FEBRUARY 26TH 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

The effects of bombing in reshaping the physical and psychological foundations of the future Britain, as illustrated by the experience of London, are the subject of the latest broadsheet, *Planning*.[1] It has been a guiding principle of the News-Letter that the future can only grow out of what is, and that, if we are to build soundly, we must know what forces are actually at work. A survey of what is happening to our society under war conditions is, therefore, very welcome. Among the conclusions arrived at regarding the far-reaching and perhaps permanent effects of air warfare are the following :

(1) Bombing has made it impossible to maintain existing administrative boundaries. Regional organisation of essential services is taking the place of local organisation. It is increasingly plain that the health and casualty services of London must be planned not by ninety-five local authorities but by a single authority.

(2) Class barriers are being assailed in the armed forces, in civil defence services, through evacuation and in other ways. While their rigidity has been lessened, it is too early to say that they are breaking down.

(3) The privacy and exclusiveness of the family has been to a large extent replaced by living in public, even during indoor leisure and rest periods, and above all in shelters. Shelter life provides opportunities for many forms of communal activity. Besides concerts and entertainments, there are now over 400 evening classes in shelters run by the L.C.C.

(4) People have learnt that they can do many things they thought they could not do, and that they can do without things which they had looked on as necessities. The nation is learning that a vigorous social purpose is a source not only of satisfaction but of strength and comfort.

THE RELATION OF TOWN AND COUNTRY

The Minister of Health in an address last month to the Gloucestershire Social Welfare Council called attention to the benefit derived by town children from a stay in the country and expressed his conviction that these advantages must be retained and developed when peace is restored. What Mr. MacDonald said on this vital question has not, so far as I know, been fully reported in the press, and his remarks are deserving of close attention:

" At present there are hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren from our towns and cities settled in the country. It would be difficult to measure the benefit which they have gained from this adventure. The fresh air has strengthened their bodies; country pursuits have broadened their minds; the beauties of nature have enriched their spirits. They are altogether healthier and more educated beings than they were before. They are a superior generation to what they would have been without this experience.

" We must so arrange things after the war that children who live in industrial towns can make visits every now and then to draw fresh draughts of health and life from England's lovely countryside. There are already a number of school camps which can be used for this purpose.

[1] No. 169, Feb. 17th, 1941 (16 Queen Anne's Gate, London, S.W.1). The broadsheets are issued at irregular intervals as occasion requires. Minimum rate of subscription £1 a year.

We shall add to their number as soon as the opportunity offers. But we need not rely on them alone. I do not believe we shall have heard the last of billeting town children in country households on the day that the last bomb explodes in an evacuation area. There are many country people who would be glad to welcome young visitors again, for a period. If we can give the necessary financial help in war, we should be able to do it in peace. I hope this is a seasonal migration which has come to stay. I hope that after the war we shall have a glorified Children's Country Holiday Fund or a Children's Country Schooling Fund on a national scale. It would have a profound and permanent effect in improving the physical and moral fibre of the nation.

" Nor should we confine the benefits to be got from periodic jaunts in the country to the children. There are certain adults who could gain almost as much from such visits. There are, for instance, expectant mothers. At the present time there are some 3,000 places for these mothers from London alone in improvised, well-equipped, expertly staffed maternity homes situated in the comparative peace and safety of the countryside, to have their confinements there. Why not continue that practice after the war for town mothers who need rest and quiet before and after their babies are born? Here again we are laying now the foundations of a better, more sensible post-war society. Already we have under the control of the Ministry of Health many country houses which have been transformed into hostels, pre-natal homes, maternity homes and the like. Some of them are houses which have been empty for years. Others of them are too large for their owners to wish to live in them again. I hope that we shall continue in peace to use them for the benefit of the people."

Alongside of this may be set a recent speech by the Minister of Agriculture. He described the remarkable advances already made in the development of agriculture in this country, and declared that what had been created was no purely war-time industry to be scrapped when happier days return. On the contrary " it will be for the nation to see that these great gains are retained, and that our incomparable countryside never again becomes a land of neglected fields and derelict hope."

A POEM BY MR. T. S. ELIOT

Those of you who value the poetry of Mr. T. S. Eliot will like to know that the *New English Weekly*[1] is publishing as a supplement to this week's issue (February 27th) a new poem by him entitled " The Dry Salvages." I am no judge of poetry but it seems to me one of the finest things he has written. Its theme is the meaning of time—a subject which was touched on in a few paragraphs in C.N.-L. No. 67.

THE MALVERN CONFERENCE

The propositions agreed upon at the Archbishop of York's conference at Malvern last month have now been published.[2] We are studying the resolutions of the conference and will deal in due course in the News-Letter with the issues they raise.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

[1] 15 Regent's Park Terrace, London, N.W.1. Single copies 6d.
[2] Industrial Christian Fellowship, 1 Broadway, Westminster, London, S.W.1. 3d. post free.

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER

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Supplement to
C.N.-L. No. 70

PREDICAMENT

The Supplement entitled "Predicament and Salvation" which was published a few weeks ago (C.N.-L. No. 59) has called forth a considerable and interesting correspondence. Many of the letters endorse the view that Christianity is felt by multitudes to-day to be irrelevant to life as it has to be lived. Several letters, in particular from those serving in the forces, emphasise the gulf which exists between Christianity as it is ordinarily presented and what is in the minds of ordinary men. For example, an officer of exceptional experience in various spheres of civil life writes: "Not one preacher that I have heard starts where his listeners are. As I sit among the troops and listen to our real, godly chaplain, I feel that it is because he hasn't the dimmest, foggiest idea of what an ordinary soldier thinks about and is, that he fails to strike a single responsive note. To teach these chaps living, exciting, painful lessons, with no apparent earthly connection with religion whatsoever, that make them want to find the underlying problems *for themselves*—that, I believe, is the art of preaching the Gospel in these times."

VARIETY OF INDIVIDUAL NEED

The correspondence reveals, as I expected, the endless variety of predicaments of men to-day. One letter explicitly calls attention to this. The writer says: "I'm not at all sure that most people's predicament is primarily religious. Each man's situation is in part psychological—the phobias and things he has grown up with; in part economic—the degree of his struggle to get a seat on the economic bus; in part cultural—the consciousness of humanity and its possibilities which forms the background to his mind; in part social—his relations with the relatively few human beings whom he actually meets, and (very important within this) in part marital—happily married, unhappily married or unmarried and all the sexual and emotional connotations of his particular fate; in part temperamental and physical—God knows how different 'being Mr. A' feels from 'being Mr. B.' It is so easy to say things about 'man' and 'society' and the 'community,' which seem true and yet make no sense when applied to Mr. A and his wife and his mates in the 'bus garage at Honor Oak.

"Well all these aspects of his 'predicament' can be modified by education, and town planning, and milk, and luck, and other things, and they are all integral parts of his 'view of reality,' in so far as he has got any, and affect his reaction or lack of reaction to your Christian message. But you can't know all these 'aspects' in general because they are as varied as humanity. The individual's headaches arise out of particular situations, like being anaemic, or having to live with X, or being despised by the boss, or slugs eating all the cabbage plants, and these things have always been so."

A NEW APPROACH

Realising the variety of individual need, I did not envisage, when I wrote the earlier Supplement, anything in the nature of a systematic and comprehensive enquiry. The material would be too voluminous and diverse for treatment in a single report. What I was concerned about was a new approach—that instead of starting out with Christian doctrine as something fixed and settled, that needs only to be taught and applied, we should begin from the other end, and set ourselves patiently to learn what are the real needs of men today, and at what point, and in what way, the Gospel has

something to say that those addressed recognise to be relevant. I suggested that if a few hundred people were to submit themselves to this discipline, large changes might come about in our understanding of the Christian faith which would bring it into more vital connection with life as it is experienced by ordinary men.

The correspondence shows that experiments in this direction are being made in a number of places. I am told of a group of parish priests in the north of England, who have set themselves to " the job of collecting a small group of laymen, one or two ' Church ' and some as ' anti ' as possible, and some ' outside ' social workers, from whom we hope to *learn* " ; and of a group in the south which consists of the director of education, two schoolmasters, two doctors, two business men, two clerks, an Anglican parson and a Free Church minister. These are soils in which new things may grow.

Here are some of the main points which emerge from the correspondence. I make no attempt to arrange them in a coherent and tidy scheme, but leave the contributions of our members to suggest lines of thought which we can follow out for ourselves.

THE MEDIOCRITY OF THE CHRISTIAN WITNESS

(1) First, there is the difficulty that the profession of Christianity makes so little apparent difference in the lives of most of its adherents. " I know several men whose lives have been transformed by Christianity," writes a business man, " but I feel that compared with the number of people who attend Churches regularly, the number of people so affected is very small."

Another layman says: " To the ' infidel ' most Christians, however genuine their internal religion appears to be, seem to be no better than, or (what is still more important in this connection perhaps) no different from, their irreligious neighbours. There are no fruits either of morality or of judgment and practical habit by which they may be known. Therefore religion looks like a spiritual indulgence—all right for those who can ' get something out of it,' but of no decisive effect and therefore (presumably) an illusion."

A third correspondent, a woman, writes : " Christ was so practical in His answers to life's difficulties and His emphasis on the powers of the Spirit. But if people don't realise and know what this power can do—how it can enlighten a mind, change a point of view, work in a human heart, renew a spirit and pour into a life powers which it doesn't possess—then I fail to see that talk about the nearness of Christ and His love, even the fact that He died, can do anything but pass them by."

Men are left in the lurch today because the Christian light burns dim. The minds of Christians have become secularised like those of others. There is in their lives little evidence of an awareness of the awful power of evil, of the reality of the struggle against the forces of darkness, of the achievement of inner peace and victory, of the working of the supernatural power of the Spirit.

THIS LIFE ENOUGH

(2) Besides predicaments of which men are aware, there is the predicament of those who are satisfied with life as it is and are unconscious that they have any further need. " How many people " a layman asks, " feel that they have a personal predicament ? How many of the younger members of the forces feel that they are in a predicament ? Unless I have sadly misjudged the people I have met, the majority of them seem quite satisfied with life as long as they have enough money, a happy home and good health." This has always been true, and the Bible has much to say about it. The things in which men trust are insecure and may vanish in a night, and even while they last there are hidden and unrecognised dissatisfactions since the true source of peace and contentment lies elsewhere.

The predicament is one, nevertheless, which can be easily misunderstood. As

one correspondent wisely writes, " The trouble so many people feel about religion is precisely that they do not ' feel religious ' themselves. They feel quite unable to produce the ' right ' spiritual emotions at will, so to speak. Many can recognise that there really is such a thing as religious experience and even holiness —they don't condemn these things as mere illusions, they see that they can exist in others, but feeling this to be quite beyond *them* they assume all religion to be a sort of subjective gift, like an ear for music which some have but most have not. It therefore cannot have the character of absolute and universal validity. The clergy do very little to recognise this difficulty because as a rule they know nothing about it. Few men would, or do, become ordained if they were not fairly rich in some sort of spiritual capacity. Hence they either assume that those outside the Church deliberately suppress their religious instincts, or lay so much stress on religion as feeling as to obliterate its aspect as a set of mind and will."

LOSS OF BELIEF IN GOD

One of our correspondents calls attention to a vital matter when, after a careful psychological analysis of the present situation, he finds the root cause of many of the maladies of modern men in a growing anxiety and sense of insecurity resulting from the loss of belief in a loving God and over-ruling Providence. Men no longer have a guarantee of the conservation of their higher values. The feeling of insecurity and of the meaninglessness of life is increased by economic conditions, such as the menace of unemployment or of insolvency, and by the lack of satisfaction in many avocations because of the absence of any clear personal purpose.

A member of Parliament has sent me a memorandum in which he deals with the progressive permeation of the general mind by the supposed conclusions of science and its disintegrating effect on religious beliefs. This influence is of the highest importance, but is too large for consideration here.

One of the letters insists that we do not sufficiently or often enough " recall to ourselves what gigantic affirmations the Creeds make or how *prima facie* incredible they are. It never surprises me to find people hesitating to declare that they really believe that God is Love, or that transcendent Deity entered into His own creation at a specific point in time and once for all. It seems to me in many ways a healthy tendency that men should be hesitating to say that they do believe these astounding things. In fact I consider fewer people in any true sense *believe* them than has been the case for centuries. The world in general has perhaps to see the Faith all over again before it can really begin to believe."

MAN'S NATURAL GOODNESS

(4) Another aspect of the religious problem of today is brought before us in the following letter from a young ordinand now serving in the forces :

" I have been much interested in the Supplement on Predicament and Salvation. The point of view expressed in it that the Church should be a learner and not try to save ordinary people from a life which only exists in the imaginations of the ecclesiastically-minded is the reason why I am in the army at the moment. When war broke out I was reading for ordination but decided to postpone it, partly for patriotic reasons, but chiefly, I hope, because it seemed a grand opportunity of getting into close touch on equal terms with the men whom the Church so largely neglects. For two happy months I was in the ranks of a regiment of real toughs from the midlands. They never talked about religion, except to discuss Church parade. Nearly all had not been to church since they were small boys. They had grown to regard the Church as something specially designed to condemn their foul language and their behaviour towards women. Admittedly their conduct in these matters deserved condemnation, but the men did not seem to realise that the Church of Christ had any praise for their wonderful loyalty and unselfishness to their mates or their willing acceptance of the discipline of military life,

thrust upon them for a cause they only dimly understood by a society which hadn't made life very attractive for them. The good news of how near they were to the Kingdom of God was denied them. The Church was something negative and conventionally moral to them. The clique of good people who go to Church (including myself) do seem to have had too much of a monopoly of the Church's life. I'm certain something on the lines of Toc H padres, priests working outside ordinary parish limitations, are essential if we are going to bridge the gap that exists in peace time between the working man and the Church-goers, who choke him off by their often quite unconscious Pharisaical moral uprightness."

This question of the significance of the natural goodness of man in the light of the Christian revelation I believe to be perhaps the central and most vital religious problem of our time. I hope some time to have a supplement on the subject. One of our members writes about it as follows :

" One school of Christian spirituality begun, or at any rate to some extent systematised by S. Ambrose, and taken up later by S. Bernard and the Cistercians, based its teaching of religion on a Christianised version of the Greek 'know thyself'.

" To take the teaching at an early date, S. Ambrose in at least two passages gives a doctrine which may be summarised as follows :—

" Man must learn that he is made in the image of God, naturally good, morally beautiful, capable of rational thought, the very glory of God. Herein lies man's dignity, God's gift to him, a glorious gift. The next stage consists in teaching man how careful he ought to be of his gift. He, like a good farmer, must cultivate his land with plough and scythe, improving the land, cutting down wild growths. He must learn above all how to use the divine gift of intelligence. The third stage is to teach man that only in the fellowship of the Church, the communion of saints, can he find his true home, where he can live in security and with the certainty that God's gifts will not be filched away while he is off his guard.

" No doubt a lot of this is commonplace, and every Christian ought to know it. But do Church people realise it ? This gospel seems to me very relevant to the present situation, with natural goodness rising on all sides to heroic levels. We must preach to these soldiers and sailors and airmen and A.R.P. workers, and all workers, and all sorts and conditions of men, that we know and appreciate their goodness but that it is powerless of itself to resist the forces of evil. Here is a point of contact and a message which can prove the vitality and reality of our religion. No doubt there are other points of contact, but this one is too often omitted."

Over against this view which looks on the natural goodness of man as a first stage in his ascent to a life in harmony with God's purpose must be set the other which has held sway in the Church, and which sees in the tremendous fact of the Crucifixion God's judgment on everything human. In the fact that the incarnation of the Son of God led to the Cross the fundamental nature of the world is disclosed. The highest human efforts fall short of God's demands. Not in man's moral strivings but solely in God's free mercy is found the hope of salvation. If man could by his own efforts find salvation, what need was there for Christ to die ?

Between these two views there is an unending tension. Is it a case of " both ... and" or of "either... or" ? Is one true and the other false ? Or is it one of the major religious tasks of our time to understand the truth in both views and to interpret this truth to our generation ?

J.H.O.

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